

Small But Mighty Agency Podcast

Episode 72: How do I set boundaries without worrying balls will get dropped?

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Are you protecting your time effectively?

Last month, I found myself in the emergency room of a hospital, and it got me thinking about the parallels between effective boundaries in an emergency room and in a business.

Not every challenge in a business, just like not every trip to the ER, is a life-or-death situation. The right boundaries help you prioritize what truly matters and let go of being the bottleneck.

In this episode, I share how to set better boundaries so you can serve your clients better and guard your time to grow your business.

Tune in.

Audrey Joy Kwan

Welcome to the Small But Mighty Agency Podcast. If you're a marketer or consultant, or a creative on a journey of growth from solopreneur to agency owner, follow along because I pull back the curtains on the realities of growing and running a scalable, service-based business and building lean team. I'm your host, Audrey Joy Kwan, I know what it takes to build an agency, whether it's from solo to three, five or twenty. I've done it, including supporting an agency owner to sell and exit. I've coached and consulted over 120 marketers, creatives, and consultants. And I've been behind the scenes of seven figure businesses. I also have a master's degree in communications specializing in organizational development. All this to say, I know what it takes to grow lead and operate a multiple six, and seven figure small but mighty agency. And here on this podcast is where we'll dive right in.

Audrey Joy Kwan

Hey Friends, welcome back to the Small But Mighty Agency Podcast. In July, I had an experience that started scary but ended with so much gratitude for life.

I checked into the emergency room of the hospital in July. I've been to emergency rooms before, but this was the fastest I've ever been moved through from nurse to testing to doctor and results.

Seeing the process at this emergency room got me thinking about the power of boundaries. Not in the way you might think. I didn't check into the emergency room because I wasn't setting healthy boundaries.

Spoiler Alert: I'm okay but had a scary few hours. Scary enough that I was quickly moved through an emergency room that can take up to seven hours.

It started with a self-diagnosis (which I do not recommend). But long story short, I have a recurring shoulder injury from an active lifestyle. I'm a runner, and I lift heavy. It's not rare that I have flare-ups. The pain started in the shoulder and spread up my neck, making me believe I wasn't paying enough attention to my form during some exercise.

But the first sign that it might be something more was my Chiropractor telling me there could be something going on in my neck other than muscle or soft tissue flare-up. The actual alarm bells came when I could barely turn my head. It was stiff, and I couldn't swallow. Alarm bells, right?

In Canada, we can call 811, which is a nurse hotline. The nurse let me speak to a doctor who said go to the emergency room in the next 24 hours. I replied, "For real?" but he emphasized getting there as soon as possible.

That's when my concern level started to rise. And it just continued to get worse. When I got to the hospital, the nurse in the emergency told me I had potential signs of meningitis. I knew that meningitis was serious, and my heart started to race even faster.

Then came the blood test. It didn't take long to get poked for the blood, but it was long enough for me to Google all things meningitis). Right in front of me was an article saying meningitis can cause death, which explains why I was fast-tracked through the emergency process.

The excellent boundaries in a hospital emergency room help bring cases like mine, with the potential for life and death, to the top of the service list.

What does this have to do with running your business? Think about it this way: if you don't have excellent boundaries, you're always putting out small fires everywhere, and you won't have the capacity to deal with the important life and business-changing things that really push the business forward. If we're too busy addressing symptoms in your business, how do you find time to work on the root cause? You don't.

If you have a service-based business and are growing a team, you're likely not a stranger to the idea of *setting better boundaries*. But I often get asked, "How do I set boundaries without worrying balls will get dropped?"

Let's take my experience in the emergency room as an example.

Not every situation that goes through an emergency room is a life-or-death scenario, just like how not every challenge, question or “emergency” in your business will burn your business down.

Boundaries help you carve out more time to work on change-making strategies or projects. It also helps you set expectations with your team, so you don’t get or stay stuck being the person who fights the fire, approves all the things, and answers all the questions.

I’m not a doctor or a nurse and have not worked in a hospital, so this is just a creative analogy based on my recent experience.

I believe the nurse was able to put me on the fast track in the emergency room because she had clear boundaries on what required immediate attention and what did not — in my case, my symptoms suggested a real emergency.

In a small business, everything can feel like an emergency that requires you (the owner) to jump in. More so, if you don’t have the effective boundaries in place.

Effective boundaries require clarity on what needs to come to you and what your team is empowered to solve.

Your team needs to know the permissions and constraints. You will stay stuck as a bottleneck if boundaries are not well-defined.

While I was in the emergency room, whatever emergency code they assigned me meant that from entering the hospital to seeing a nurse, getting my blood drawn and meeting a doctor happened in under 60 minutes.

I’ve been to the emergency room before, and this is the fastest I’ve been moved through. That’s because symptoms of Meningitis are serious.

I imagine the nurse knew how to flag and escalate because of training and boundaries, with clear permissions and constraints. Those boundaries served me (the patient) better and protected the doctor’s time so he could see the serious situations faster.

Setting clear and effective boundaries in a business can help you serve similar objectives: (1) it will help you serve clients better because you are training your team to address things without, and (2) it will protect your time to have a greater impact in your business.

Clear permissions and limitations are how we structure boundaries for business owners. I explain permissions and limitations using the exercise of red, yellow, and green, like a traffic light. Red is a constraint or limitation; it identifies what not to do, when to stop or when it is absolutely necessary to escalate to another person.” Yellow are circumstances, for example (do Y only if X exists), and green means “you have the go-ahead” or authority to make the decisions.

When you have clear permissions and limitations, you are on your way to better boundaries that help you and your team serve clients better by surfacing the urgent from the routine without you being the bottleneck.

How can you apply the red, yellow, and green system to your business to set better boundaries? I encourage you to look at actions in your business where you find yourself stuck and feeling like the only person who can give answers, then identify who in your business can support these functions and what red, yellow and green permissions and limitations can help them to be more effective.

If you want to set better boundaries and processes and have an effective team structure, the power of clarifying permissions and limitations gets you closer. It helps you serve your clients better, guard your time, and protect yourself from being a bottleneck.

On the topic of being a bottleneck, I have a free private audio event coming to you; it's all about Breaking Free from Being the Bottleneck. To access the audio event, click the link in the show notes or go to audreyjoykwan.com/breakfree

If you're a consulting, marketing or creative agency owner still stuck in the "it's easier to do it myself" cycle, this is for you. I've thoughtfully curated a line-up you won't find anywhere else of 5 agency owners and leaders who found themselves bottlenecks at different stages and seasons of their business where (quote) "just delegate" (unquote) isn't enough.

There is so much more to growing a business than "just delegate." You'll learn what you have to own and what you'll have to shake to grow a business that isn't a ball and chain and break free from being the bottleneck.

Get the details and RSVP at [👉 audreyjoykwan.com/breakfree](https://audreyjoykwan.com/breakfree). The link is in the show notes. It's a private audio event, so RSVP using the link for unlimited access to listen anywhere. It starts September 18th, 2023.

As for my health. Thank goodness it turned out not to be meningitis. The doctors did find a cause, and I'm 100% on the mend 😊

So that's it for this episode, friends. Thanks for spending your time with me today, and I'll see you on the next one.

Audrey Joy Kwan

Hey, there. Thanks for hanging out with me at the Small But Mighty Agency Podcast. If you enjoyed this episode, it would mean the world to me if you hit the follow or subscribe button in your podcast app and share it with a friend and I'll see you in the next one.